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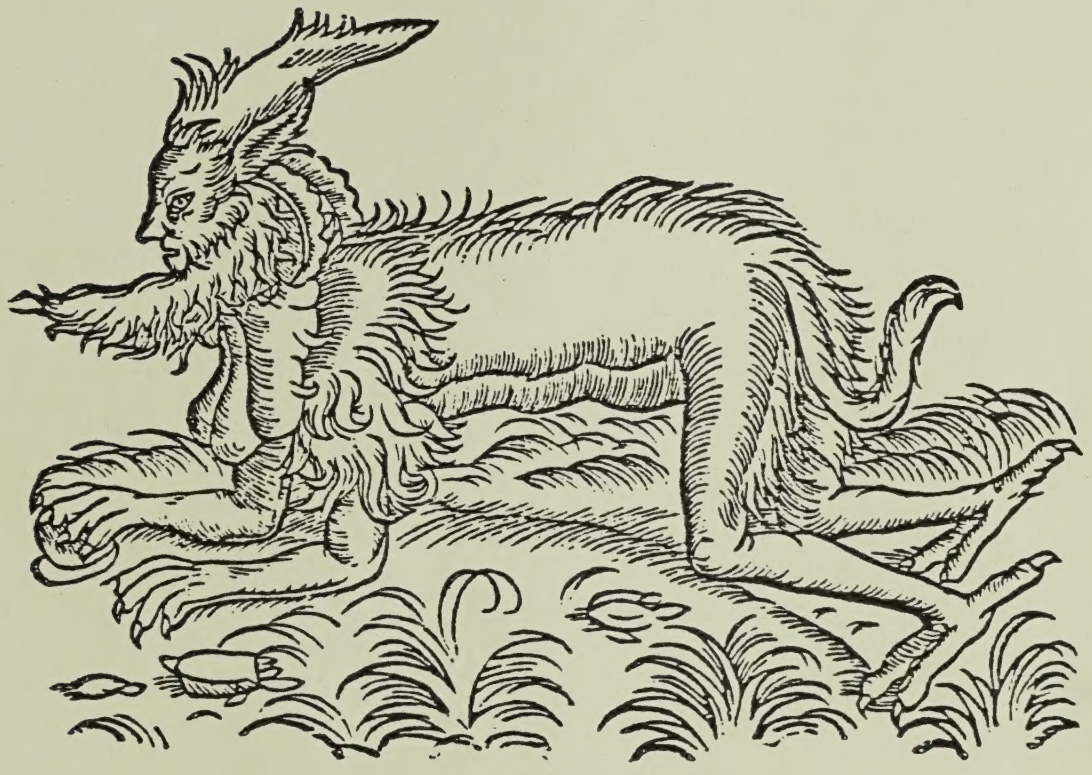
Fabulous Beasts



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FABULOUS BEASTS

"If you don't know what a Griffon is, look at the picture"
--Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

The books displayed in this exhibition are drawn from a variety of fields, including natural history, art, alchemy, heraldry and literature. They have been selected to show how popular and wide spread the idea of the 'fabulous beast' has been and to show the beasts themselves as many illustrators have imagined them.

What are fabulous beasts? Many of those displayed, such as the Basilisk and the Griffon, are composite creatures, combining parts from the bodies of different animals in fearsome combinations. Some are fabulous because they possess a legendary characteristic, such as the Salamander with its ability to extinguish flames. There are remarkable combinations of vegetable and animal such as the Barnacle Goose. Some, such as the Unicorn, are well known by their names; others, for example, the winged lion, symbol of St. Luke, are nameless. But all fabulous beasts have one feature in common - their existence is purely imaginary - or so we believe today.

It is not a simple matter to say to what extent the writers and illustrators of the past actually believed in the creatures they described. But then, it is only to the naturalists in the exhibition that the question applies. For the poet and the moralist, the literary or symbolic value of the fabulous beast was more important than its existence or non-existence. The natural historian, on the other hand, had an obligation to scientific truth, not an easy obligation to fulfill in the era when respect for past authorities was still an important influence and natural history exploration was yet to come. The great encyclopaedic zoologists of the sixteenth century, such as Konrad Gesner, were not prepared to banish the Unicorn from their works. Sir Thomas Browne's Pseudodoxia epidemica of 1646 cleared the air of many false beliefs, including the Griffon and the Phoenix, but even this sceptical writer believed in a Basilisk-like creature which could kill at a distance by exhaling poisonous fumes. It wasn't until the early nineteenth century that Cuvier showed anatomically that an animal with cloven hoofs could not have a single horn growing from the middle of its forehead. That people actually believed in some of the creatures displayed in this exhibition may seem amusing to modern man but, it hardly needs to be said, every age has its own world of wonders.

For speculations regarding the origins of these fabulous beasts and tales of their exploits, the reader is referred to: Heinz Mode, Fabulous beasts and demons, London, 1973; Peter Lum, Fabulous beasts, New York, 1971; and T.H. White, The bestiary; a book of beasts, New York, 1960.

GLOSSARY

AMPHISBAENA - a serpent with a head at either end.

BASILISK/COCKATRICE - the most feared of the fabulous beasts despite its small size; has the head of a cock and the body of a serpent; said to be born from a cock's egg, hatched by a toad or a snake; fatal to anyone unfortunate enough to see it, hear it, or breathe in its foul exhalations; vulnerable only to a man covered in mirrors, or a weasel, which the wise traveller across the Libyan Desert included in his party.

BISHOP FISH AND MONK FISH - a fish resembling a bishop or a monk in the upper half of its body.

DRAGON - usually portrayed as a scaly, lizard-like, fire-breathing, winged creature; often serves as the guardian of the treasure or 'master of the ground'; much feared in Western legend (in contrast to the Oriental dragon which is considered benevolent and a companion to mankind)

GRIFFON - a creature with the head, wings and forepart of an eagle; the rear part of the body, that of a lion; usually depicted with pointed, up-standing ears; fierce and cunning, much-feared.

HARPY - a creature with the head and breasts of a woman and the body and claws of a vulture.

HIPPOGRIFF - a sort of second-generation fabulous beast, being the result of the union of a Griffon and a mare.

LAMIA - a monster in the shape of a woman, given to preying on human beings and sucking children's blood.

MANTICORE - a creature with the face of a man and the body of a lion; with three rows of teeth.

PHOENIX - an extremely long-lived, eagle-like bird, of which there is only one at any one time; chiefly remarkable for the generation of the young Phoenix from the ashes of its parent.

SALAMANDER - a small lizard-like creature, remarkable for its ability to withstand and extinguish fire; also able to cool hot water.

SATYR - a shaggy man, with the ears, tail and legs of a horse or goat.

UNICORN - a one-horned horse or stag; the horn valued in the Middle Ages for its reputed ability to detect poisons; could be captured only by a perfumed and be-flowered virgin (or a young man masquerading as such)

CASE 1 EARLY MANUSCRIPTS

1. Physiologus. Physiologus Bernensis. Voll-Faksimile-Ausgabe des Codex

Bongarsianus 318 der Burgerbibliothek Bern. Basel, 1964.

The Physiologus is a collection of tales describing the character and behaviour of animals. The work is supposed to have been written in Greek, sometime between the second and fourth centuries A.D., by a man nicknamed Physiologus. Enlarged and elaborated over the centuries, it came to be known as the Bestiary by the twelfth century. By this time, the tale about the animal served as the basis for a Christian, moral lesson. This particular Latin manuscript dates from the ninth century. It is opened to the story of the Salamander, which is here inexplicably shown as a Satyr, cooling a tub of hot water.

2. Bestiary. Latin. [The Bestiary; being a reproduction in full of the manuscript II.4.26 in the University Library, Cambridge ... Oxford, 1928]

This is the twelfth century Latin manuscript chosen by T.H. White for his translation: The bestiary; a book of beasts. New York, 1954. Shown is the Basilisk, which, the Bestiary informs us, can only be destroyed by a weasel, for "God never makes anything without a remedy".

3. Beatus, Saint, presbyter of Liebana, d. 798. Beato de Liébana Comentario al Apocalipsis; edición facsimil del Codice de Gerona, Beati in Apocalips in libri duodecim. Madrid [1975]

The Apocalypse, along with the Bestiary, was a popular 'picture book' of the Middle Ages. This Latin manuscript, dating from 975 A.D., is opened to show a pair of seven-headed serpents.

4. The Book of Kells; reproductions from the manuscript in Trinity College, Dublin. London [1974]

Included among the illuminations of this celebrated manuscript are the winged lion and winged bull, symbols of the evangelists St. Mark and St. Luke.

CASE 2 HERALDRY AND ALCHEMY

5. Guillim, John. A display of heraldry. A new ed. London, 1640.

Fabulous beasts were frequently used as heraldic symbols. As Guillim describes them: "Another sort of exorbitant animals much more prodigious than all the former; such are those creatures formed or rather deformed with the confused shapes of creatures of different kinds and qualities". The illustrations show a pair of Harpies and a Mermaid.

6. Guillim, John. A display of heraldry. 5th edition, much enlarged ... London, 1679.

This is a later edition of Guillim's book opened to show various Griffons, perhaps the most frequently used fabulous beast in heraldry.

7. Legh, Gerard, d. 1563. The accedens of armory. [London, 1576]

Legh's treatise on heraldry is described by the National Dictionary of Biography as "a medley of irrelevant learning". It is opened to show a winged dragon bearing a banner.

8. The Hermetic museum restored and enlarged ... Now first done into English from the Latin original published at Frankfort in the year 1678. London, 1893.

This work is a translation of a collection of alchemical pieces. The illustration is from the Book of Lambspring ... concerning the philosophical stone. It depicts the Salamander being held in the flames, a stage in the manufacture of the elusive 'philosopher's stone'.

9. Barrett, Francis. Magus; or, Celestial intelligencer. London, 1801.

Barrett was a well known English mystic. In this work, he gives directions for compiling a Book of Spirits. The image of the spirit is to appear on the left side page and its description on the right. In the illustration, one such spirit is shown on the back of a winged dragon.

CASE 3 HUMAN MONSTROSITIES AND VEGETABLE/ANIMALS

10. Paré, Ambroise, 1510?-1590. The workes. London, 1634.

In his Of monsters and prodigies, Paré says: "We call monsters what things soever are brought forth contrary to the common decree and order of nature". He explained his human monsters, shown here, as the result of copulation between man and beast.

11. Schedel, Hartmann, 1440-1514. Liber chronicarum. Nuremberg, 1493.

These woodcuts from the Nuremberg Chronicle depict various monsters presumed to inhabit India. Some, such as the 'umbrella man' who shades himself with one large foot, must be purely imaginary; others were possibly inspired by real abnormal births.

12. Liceti, Fortunio, 1577-1657. De monstris. Patavii, 1668.

13. Parkinson, John, 1567-1650. Paradisi in sole paradisus terrestris. London, 1656.

Parkinson was an apothecary and herbalist. The frontispiece of this work,

which first appeared in 1629, shows Adam and Eve tending the plants in the Garden of Eden. Among them is the 'Vegetable lamb of Tartary', resembling a lamb in appearance and believed to have the power to destroy other plants near it.

14. Gerard, John, 1545-1612. The herball; or, General historie of plants. London, 1597.

Gerard's stature as an herbalist is diminished somewhat by his perpetuating the legend of the Barnacle Goose: "There are founde in the north parts of Scotland, & the islands adjacent, called Orchades, certaine trees, whereon doe growe certaine shellfishes of a white colour tending to russet; wherein are contained little living creatures; which shels in time of maturitie doe open and out of them grow little living things; which falling into the water doe become foules, whom we call Barnakles, in the north of England Brant Geese ..."

CASES 4-6 NATURAL HISTORY

15. Gesner, Konrad, 1516-1565. Historiae animalium, liber primus. De quadrupedibus viviparis. Editio secunda. Francofurti, 1602.

Gesner, along with Aldrovandi, Belon and Rondelet, was one of the chief zoologists of the scientific renaissance of the sixteenth century. His great Historiae animalium first appeared in four volumes between 1551 and 1558. A considerable part of the text is given over to citing earlier authorities as was the practise of the time. Consequently such fabulous beasts as the Unicorn and the Satyr remain. The Rhinoceros displayed is not a fabulous beast strictly defined but it does provide a remarkable example of the fanciful elaboration that could result when the artist was unable to see an actual specimen. The design for this well-known woodcut comes from Albrecht Dürer who was sent a sketch of a rhinoceros in 1513.

16. Gesner, Konrad. Historiae animalium, liber IV, qui est de piscium & aquatilium animantium natura. Editio secunda. Francofurti, 1604.

The Bishop fish and the Monk fish were incorporated by Gesner from the works of Belon and Rondelet, respectively. Examples of both these creatures were said to have been caught off the coast of Norway in the sixteenth century but neither survived when taken far from the sea.

17. Topsell, Edward, 1572-1625? The history of four-footed beasts and serpents and insects. New York, 1967. Volume 1. (Facsimile of London, 1658 edition)

Although untrained in natural history, Topsell gained distinction for producing the first work about animals published in Great Britain in English. It is not, however, an original work. The volume on four-footed beasts, which

first appeared in 1607, is mainly a translation of Gesner's work on the same subject. Shown is the Manticore.

18. Topsell, Edward. The history of four-footed beasts and serpents and insects. New York, 1967. Volume 2. (Facsimile of London, 1658 edition)

Topsell's volume on serpents, which first appeared in 1608, was again a translation from Gesner, this time with major additions from other authors. The woodcuts, too, are copied from Gesner but tend to be cruder than the originals. Shown from this volume are a number of winged dragons.

19. Paré, Ambroise. Opera. Parisiis, 1582.

Paré is obliged to Gesner for these sea monsters in his Of monsters and prodigies.

20. Pomet, Pierre, 1658-1699. A complete history of drugs ... done into English. ... 4th ed. London, 1748.

Pomet claims that what was sold by the apothecaries of his day as Unicorn's horn was actually the "horn of a certain fish, by the islanders called Narvual [i.e. Narwhal] He nevertheless gives traditional descriptions of the Unicorn.

21. Bossi, Luigi, 1758-1835. Dei basilischi, dragoni, ed altri animali creduti favolosi. Milano, 1792.

This plate of the Basilisk does not give a true idea of the supposed hideous nature of the beast.

22. Münster, Sebastian, 1489-1552. Cosmographiae universalis. [Basileae, 1559]

Münster's Cosmographiae first appeared in 1544 and underwent constant revision in later editions. This particular edition contains a marvellous double page woodcut of sea monsters presumed to inhabit the northern seas.

23. Boaistuau, Pierre, d. 1556. Histoires prodigieuses. Paris, 1568.

24. Plinius Secundus, Caius. Historia natural. Madrid, 1624-29.

Pliny's work on natural history was written in the first century A.D. and served as a major source for all subsequent writers on the subject until the end of the scientific renaissance. This Spanish edition contains woodcuts of the animals described, among them the Phoenix, which, in Pliny's version of the legend, lives for 660 years.

25. Jonstonus, Joannes, 1603-1675. Historiae naturalis de avibus. Francofurti ad Moenum, 1650.

Jonstonus presents four fabulous creatures on one plate: The Harpy, the Griffon, the Phoenix, and the Pelican (which feeds its young by puncturing its breast)

26. Browne, Sir Thomas, 1605-1682. Pseudodoxia epidemica; or, Enquiries into very many received tenents and commonly presumed truths. London, 1646.

Writing in the middle of the scientific revolution, Browne set himself the task of clearing the way of many false beliefs, the legacies of antiquity and pre-scientific attitudes. The Phoenix, the Griffon, the Amphisbaena and the fire-proof Salamander are all relegated to the realm of the imaginary.

CASE 7 PRINTER'S DEVICES AND EMBLEMS

Printer's devices may be thought of as marks of ownership or trade marks. Items 27-30 show a number of such devices based on fabulous beasts.

27. Bruni, Leonardo Aretino, 1369-1444. Leonardo Aretini Rerum suo tempore in Italia gestarum commentarius. Lugduni, 1539.

Printer: Sébastian Gryphius, 1493-1556
Device: Griffon

28. Despautère, Jean, ca. 1460-1520. Rudimenta. Secunda edita. Parrisiis [1518]

Printer: Denis Roce, fl. 1490-1518
Device: Griffon

29. Plinius Secundus, Caius. Historia naturale ... Venetia, 1544.

Printer: Gabriel Giolito de' Ferrari, fl. 1541-78
Device: Phoenix

30. Yeats, William Butler, 1865-1939. Last poems and two plays. Dublin, 1939.

Printer: Cuala Press
Device: Unicorn

31. Contile, Luca, 1505-1574. Ragionamento ... sopra la proprietà delle impresse con le particolari de gli Academici affidati et con le interpretationi et croniche. Pavia, 1574.

Fabulous beasts were frequently used as 'emblems', that is, in allegorical designs accompanying a moralising text.

32. Ferrer de Valdecebro, Andrés, 1620-1680. Govierno general, moral, y politico.

The Unicorn was often used as an emblem because it was believed to possess nobility.

CASE 8 LITERATURE AND ART

33. Colonna, Francesca, d. 1527. Hypnerotomachie. Paris, 1546.

This is a French edition of a renowned illustrated book which first appeared in 1499. The woodcut shows the 'dreamer' of this allegorical tale being compelled by the arrival of a fierce dragon to enter "The darke and obscure vastness which before I was afraid to enter into".

34. Ariosto, Lodovico, 1474-1533. Roland furieux; poème héroïque. Traduit par A.J. Du Pays, et illustré par Gustave Doré. Nouv. ed. Paris, 1888.

Ariosto's epic poem was begun in 1503. In this French edition of 1888, the great French illustrator Gustave Doré shows the hero Roger, borne by the Hippogriff, arriving in the nick of time to save Angelica from the sea monster Orca.

35. Philostratus, Flavius. Les images ou tableaux de platte peinture des deux Philostrates sophistes grecs et les statues de Callistrate. Paris, 1629.

The plate shows the Satyr, a Greek woodland deity.

36. Hollar, Wenceslaus, 1607-1677.

Hollar found the two-headed serpent, Amphisbaena, particularly appropriate for symbolizing the English Civil war.

37. Dodgson, Charles Lutwidge, 1832-1898. Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland. Illustrated by Ralph Steadman. New York, 1973.

Tenniel's drawing of a Griffon in the original edition of Carroll's Alice in Wonderland corresponds closely to early descriptions of the creature; Ralph Steadman's version is somewhat more loosely interpreted ("The Gryphon

to me is the commissionaire of a modern office block. His epaulettes are his wings ...")

38. Davies, William Robertson, 1913- . The manticore, a novel. Toronto [c1972]

Ian Crellin
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